Review of Robert Cramer: Vergils Weltsicht. Optimismus und Pessimismus in Vergils Georgica

Robert Cramer: *Vergils Weltsicht.* Optimismus und Pessimismus in Vergils Georgica. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter 1998. X, 309 S. (Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte. 51.).

C.'s reading of the Georgics is a very linear one, with brief introduction (1–3) and conclusion (255–57) framing four chapters on each of the four books of the 'Georgics', and with six appendices, the effect being somewhat like a selective commentary. It is, moreover, difficult to discern an actual thesis behind the work, which in approach, tone and style resembles nothing so much as a vast book review, to all intents and purposes, of my 1988 commentary, with occasional references to others named with me in the preface (chiefly Putnam and Ross, and also Lyne, «ein bekennender 'Pessimist'»).[1] All is aimed at refuting anything and everything that would tend away from his conclusion, reached on p. 255: «Wenn wir uns nun abschließend noch einmal die Frage vorlegen, ob die *Georgica* von einer optimistischen oder einer pessimistischen Grundhaltung geprägt sind, so muß die Antwort nach dem bisher Gesagten wohl lauten: von einer eher optimistischen.». Given the limitations of space for a real book review, and given this special relationship between author and reviewer, the reader will have to decide for himself as to the possible meanings of this poem – there are, for instance, 45 pages (70–114) and 231 footnotes directed against my 11 pages of commentary on the 'laudes Italiae'. In general, however, I would say that the insistence that we must feel optimism about the Georgics seems hard to support, and I devote this review to pointing out some of the specific problematic issues of C.'s argument, ending with a focus on its most profound flaw, one, however, for which C. is only partially responsible. As we shall see, C. is writing on a Georgics that has been trimmed of more then 200 lines, with the result that he and I were really dealing with different poems.

But first, the opposition 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic', as various critics who have engaged ideology in Virgil have noted, is something of a simplistic reduction, and I have myself very rarely used the latter word to describe the ambivalence and even darkness that pervades this poet, in the Georgics and elsewhere. It will not be found in the introduction to my commentary, nor much in the notes, though occasionally on lines such as 3. 66–8, on which T. E. Page long ago (1898, ad loc.) noted «These famous lines illustrate Virgil's 'pessimism'» – lines incidentally which are never cited or discussed by Cramer in this 1996/97 Bonn dissertation. The term 'pessimistic', particularly in recent years, has been used chiefly by proponents of what I have elsewhere called the 'Augustan reading',[2] as a rhetorical strategy directed at an overdefining of oppositional or ambivalent readings (for some samples, see C. 1–2). On the other hand such critics never term themselves 'optimistic', which I take as further indication of the strategy. It is very difficult, particularly in the light of scholarship of the last 40 years, to maintain an unequivocally optimistic view of any of Virgil's poetry;[3] but C. seems to have been sufficiently insulated to construct a fully positive and posi-

[1] As indicated, for example at pp. 2, 5, 69.

[2] See in particular, R. F. Thomas, Virgil and the Augustean Reception (Cambridge 2001).

[3] C. does not mention or include in his generally good bibliography C. Perkell's 'The Poet's Truth. A Study of the Poet in Virgil's Georgics' (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1989), indispensable for anyone working on this topic.

tivistic reading, and is utterly confident about the scorecard at the end of the poem.

C. achieves his conclusion by a variety of means, chiefly by insisting on downplaying those elements that might tend in the other direction, that is, by a radical underreading.

So at 1.118–21 and 150–59, lines which tell of the fate of the man who fails to carry out the ethics of toil and resists the depredations of weeds, birds and shade (cf. 158–59 *heu magnum alterius frustra spectabis acervum/ concussaque famem in silvis solabere*), we are told (24) the tone is playful and light, with invocation (for no good reason) of Horace's amusing picture of the Stoic at Epist. 1.1.106–08 (*praecipue sanus, nisi cum pituita molesta est*). Likewise the insects and creatures which assail the threshing floor (1.181–86; cf. 184–85 *quae plurima terrae/ monstra ferunt*) are said to have a playful tone – C. nowhere mentions the mythical analogs of these creatures, the earthborn Giants who similarly threaten Jupiter's realm at 1. 278–79 (*tum partu terra nefando ... creat).* Assessment of tone is a difficult task, but the fact is that the Georgics is a metaphorical construct, and once we enter that metaphor, the insects, animals, weeds and birds are a serious threat, as they are in the real life of the farmer.

A further strategy for leading us towards an unequivocally, univocally optimistic reading of the poem lies in the suppression or denial of any ambiguity or alternative reading that might disrupt the upbeat.

So six pages (37–43) are spent in persuading us to take the infamous *labor omnia vicit / improbus et duris urgens in rebus egestas* as indicating that toil solved all problems. That genie does not go easily back into the bottle from which Altevogt released it, as Mynors and I note in our commentaries. In the course of some 45 pages (70–114) it is argued that the qualifications, contradictions and idealizations of the *laudes Italiae*, discussed by Servius and other 'pessimists', myself included, are not to be felt, and that Virgil is not activating comparison with the golden age of the fourth Eclogue.

I will not rehearse the varieties of ways in which Virgil's passage falls short of the encomiastic genre which is its formal model, but will just note that C. has to resort to special pleading throughout in order to brighten the shadows and account for the inconsistencies of the Virgilian passage.

At 2.458–60, as Virgil begins his praise of the supposedly real farmer, he evokes the spontaneity of the golden age that existed before Jupiter introduced farming and so ended the golden age (2.459–60 [*agricolas*] *quibus ipsa procul discordibus armis / fundit humo facilem victum iustissima tellus;* 1.127–289 [*ante Iovem*] *ipsaque tellus / omnia liberius nullo poscente ferebat*). Critics, myself included, naturally see a connection here to the coming golden age and its spontaneous earth at Ecl. 4.18–23 (*nullo ... cultu/tellus ... fundet / ipsae ... ipsa*). Gaining sustenance in the real world of Jupiter is anything but easy, as stipulated early in the poem: 1.122–23 *pater ipse colendi / haud facilem esse viam voluit.* A possible interpretation of this incongruity (golden age earth in the age of labor) lies in the possibility that the end of Geo. 2 is demonstrably an idealization, or fictionalization, of the realities of agriculture. C. will have none of that, so he distinguishes these passages (134ff) from the obviously similar ones in Eclogue 4, resorting to extreme literal-mindedness, by claiming that the differences (absence of spontaneous *flowers* and *honey* at Geo. 2.458ff) are as important as the similarities, that *nullo cultu* is absent from the later passage (but that is what *ipsa* means!), and so on. And when later in Geo. 2 Virgil is explicit on these 'farmers' (2.538 *aureus hanc vitam in terris Saturnus agebat*), since C. can no longer deny that the Saturnian age is being alluded to, he forbids us from thinking of the *Virgilian* Saturn under whom agriculture did not exist; in order to avoid seeing intratextual contradiction we must keep our minds only on the golden age of Aratus, for whom farming did

exist in the golden age (142–43). If the reading can be controlled on the minute level, we will be led along the path of 'optimism'.

C.'s reading is strongly teleological and progressive. The world of the bees, communal, monarchistic and devoid of love, a world that has seemed sterile and incomplete to many readers, is upheld (pp. 231–38) as an ideal (as it was by Seneca, and by Dahlmann), and is seen as a salutary sequel to the *furor amoris* of Book 3. To the extent that is true, the conclusion may not be as optimistic as C. would wish. Virgil's *description* of a 'successful' society leaves unanswered but not unimplied the question of how we judge the *nature* and *quality* of that society. Similarly with C.'s view of the second half of Book 4, in which the recovery of the bees at the end of Book 4 creates the final tone and verdict of the poem, cancelling out not only the devastation of the plague at the end of Book 3 (p. 240–41, 253), but also the loss of Orpheus and Eurydice. All is made good by the final sacrifice of Aristaeus and the return of the bees, the conventional upbeat reading of the poem.

Ironically, C. quotes Griffin's much quoted sentence in the final footnote (p. 254, n. 963), «For my part I cannot feel that the restoration of the bees outweighs the suffering and death of Orpheus and Eurydice, especially in view of the way Virgil has handled the story.» Of course C. disagrees with this, but the fact is that Virgil inscribed the possibility of such a conclusion, and no amount of philological argument is likely remove it. C. also argues ingeniously (251–54) that at the end we move from the guilt of Aristaeus (for chasing Eurydice) to the guilt of Orpheus for breaking the laws of the Underworld: p. 252 «Auch Orpheus verstößt gegen Gesetze und Abmachungen (vgl. *legem* am Ende von 487 und *foedera* zu Beginn von 493), auch Eurydike wird vom Schicksal zurückgerufen.» But Virgil, as at the end of the Aeneid, allows a glimpse of what might have been, had the world been different: 4.489 *cum subita incautum dementia cepit amantem / ignoscenda quidem, scirent si ignoscere Manes*. In C.'s reading Orpheus is like the rower of 1.202, swept away because he did not follow the laws of nature and of toil.

These are good observations, but they can lead to a different conclusion than that needed by C., for they easily imply a deeply qualified view of a world where such a lapse of attention, brought about by human failing, leads to destruction.

Now we turn to the book's most profound flaw, a feature that needs special attention. I suggested in my commentary that one of the strongest and most potent intratexts of the Georgics resides in two passages in which a ploughman, agent of Jupiter's *labor*, evicts birds from their nest. At 4.511–15, this occurs in the simile of Orpheus lamenting the loss of Eurydice, like the nightingale lamenting its young, victim of the hard-hearted ploughman, implicitly a paradigm for Aristaeus, self-professed ploughman of 4.330–31 (512–13 *quos durus arator / observans nido implumis detraxit*). The other instance has to do with a real ploughman (*iratus ... arator*), who clears woodland and drives the birds from their ancient homes (207–11). That is the price of progress: in order to secure the best ploughland you must sweep the old away.

To understand C.'s reaction to passages like this, you have to start with the end of C's preface: «Eine besondere Schwierigkeit ergibt sich allerdings aus der Tatsache, daß die Textgrundlage keineswegs so sicher erscheint, wie man zumindest in diesem Jahrhundert bislang allgemein angenommen hat.» And so it emerges that Otto Zwierlein, C.'s Doktorvater and an otherwise considerable scholar, has now turned his athetizing attention from the text of Plautus to that

of Virgil – *quod numquam veriti sumus*. At the time of this writing, Zwierlein's study is still forthcoming, but Cramer gives us a preview, bracketing in his index the more than 200 of the Georgics' 2186 lines, in all of which cases he seems to accept the findings of Zwierlein. In none, or next to none, of these lines do the MSS give any encouragement for removal. All is motivated by hermeneutics, and hermeneutics which justify themselves by the very violence they do to the text. The hermeneutic circle has never spun so quickly as in this work. Included among the lines that are to go, along with their birds, are those just mentioned, 2.207–11, the lines on the angry ploughman (nn. 954, 1056). Gone with them is the possibility or need to interpret the passage depicting the violence and disruption to the natural world that is necessitated by man's successful operations in the age of Jupiter – one of the main strands of the poem that militates against a purely optimistic reading of the poem. Take away focus on the victim, the quintessence of the Virgilian outlook, and you take away Virgil's poetry.

Not bracketed in the index, but condemned in the text and hanging by a thread which will eventually be cut by Zwierlein himself are three passages («drei recht befremdliche Passagen» 201) at 3.525–47 including the lines that Scaliger wished he had had the genius to compose:[4] «in all diesen Fällen hegen wir mit Zwierlein erhebliche Bedenken gegen die Authentizität der Passagen, nicht nur im Blick auf Einzelnes, sondern auch im Blick auf den Gesamtgedankengang» (202). I assume the self-confidence of this position is due to extreme critical naivety and to a positivism that is not tenable in many places on this earth in 2001, but it is no less troubling and seemingly arrogant for that. We are back with T.S. Eliot's Virgil as a classic, a Virgil who cannot be strange, since he writes just as we would write, logically, economically, and not too 'pessimistically'. But the fate of the the ox at 3.525–30 can be read as a strong undercutting of the fictional dream of rural ease depicted at the end of Geo. 2, which included pleasantly lowing cattle (2.470–71). In the plague, the ox that had lived simply, on leaves and grass, not on banquets, its sleep undisturbed by care (3.530 *nec somnos abrumpit cura salubris*), dies in agony. In the real world of *labor*, such ethical and moral virtues will provide no protection from plague, and when plague comes, as it indubitably does in Virgil's poem, the ox derives no comfort from shady groves, pastures or crystal streams (3.520–2): its simplicity, its toil and its deserts are as nothing, its gentle mooing induces no sleep but rather resounds through the parched river-valleys and sloping hills, heralding the impending death (3.554–5 *crebris mugitibus amnes / arentesque sonant ripae collesque supini*). No theodicy here.

There are various ways of avoiding this passage, of avoiding those powerful Virgilian words, which explore the injustice of the ox's death and the questioning of the poem's very subject: *quid labor aut benefacta iuvant? quid vomere terras / invertisse gravis*. We can ignore them, as many readers do, by forming their judgements of this poem from Georgics 2. 458–540 alone; we can weaken them through translation, as Day Lewis does; or we can, now with Zwierlein and C., resort to textual cleansing.[5] And if we are bothered by the bleating and bellowing of the dying animals a few lines later at 3.554–55 (*balatu pecorum et crebris mugitibus amnes / arentesque sonant ripae collesque supini*), they will take care of them too (p. 198, n. 767 «scheinen nachträglich eingefügt.»). In this case the lines are removed so that the subject of 551–3 and 556–57 (Tisiphone) may not be interrupted (cf. p. 198 n. 767). Such a manoeuvre in fact ruins the drama of the situation, in

[4] C. nowhere indicates the identity of the anonymous poet or poets who produced the 200 athetized lines of the Georgics – including those envied by Scaliger. It is to be hoped that Zwierlein will not lay them at the door of bunglers and scribblers equivalent to those he thinks wrote much of the corpus of Plautus.

[5] For this as a feature of Virgilian reception in general, see Thomas (above, n. 2) Ch. 6 'Philology and Textual Cleansing.'

which the disease is figured as progressive: 1) 551–53 (stage one) Tisiphone emerges from Stygian darkness driving Disease and Dread before her, lifting her greedy head higher by the day; 2) 554–55 (as a result) the rivers, parched banks and hills resound to the bleating and bellowing (of infected herds); 3) 556–57 (stage two) and now (*iamque*) she deals out death in heaps and piles up the (dead) bodies in the stables, until (*donec*); 4) 558 (as a result) men learn to bury them and cover them up. Take out 2) and you have no result following the first stage. Of course you can also take out line 558, and so gain a really lean and much more economical text (p. 199, n. 768 «wirkt er ungeschickt und störend»), following Zwierlein as C. does: «Man wird den in Frage stehenden Vers daher mit Zwierlein zu tilgen haben.» Best also to get rid of 3.537–47, which demonstrate the only possible 'golden age' in the real world of toil and sickness, one in which the snake dies off (of plague), and the wolf stops hunting sheep because he is too sick to do otherwise, while dogs and deer wander among each other. These eleven lines can go, C. tells us (202) because Virgil had already mentioned sick dogs at 3.496 (economy rules!), and because Ovid had no seals and fish (cf. 3.541–43) in his plague. But the real reason they must go is so they may not disrupt the optmistic reading.

It will surprise no one to discover that Zwierlein and Cramer follow Peerlkamp in removing the *vituperatio vitis*, the final technical passage of Book 2 (454–57, by mistake not bracketed in the index, where we find that the previous 14 lines have also been consigned to the square brackets), and a section that also interfers with a simply optimistic assessment of what has been the chief subject of that book, the vine: «Auch die Verse 454–457 unterbrechen die aufgezeigte gedankliche Entwicklung [as desiderated by C.] und werden zu Recht von Zwierlein athetiert. Thomas 1986, 259 meinte dagegen noch: 'Peerlkamp and Forbiger (*but nobody since*) took the most convenient expedient of ejecting all four lines.' (Hervorhebung von mir). Diese Feststellung scheint nun überholt.» That final sentence exemplifies the besotting effect of the 'method', clearly communicated unquestioningly from adviser to student, and so closley embraced that there is an implied onus on those who would keep the 200 lines in that they defend their position. What will perhaps surprise readers will be the discovery of what has gone at the beginning of Geo. 2.

As recent critics of the poem have noted (Mynors, Ross, and myself) most of the inter-species grafts recorded by Virgil at 2.32–34, 69–72 are impossibilities.

As I noted on the former, «Between unrelated woody perennials it is doubtful if a definitely compatible union has ever been established» (so R. J. Garner, The Grafter's Handbook [Oxford 1958] 36). On no new evidence (Columella and the Geoponica slavishly follow Virgil), C. lamely expresses the hope that they might have been possible (128–29), and he in any case removes lines 32–34 (258–59), as he does 71–2 (126). I had argued that the contiguity of these falsehoods to 2.35, Virgil's injunction to the farmer to learn grafts according to species (*proprios generatim discite cultus*), ironically draws attention to the technical falsehood and sets the stage for larger falsehoods throughout Book 2 (details of the *laudes Italiae* and the idealized farmer at the end, in particular). So Virgil, here singing an *Ascraeum carmen* through Roman towns (2.176), is in a Hesiodic tradition where truth and falsehood are prominently at issue (*Theog.* 27–28). Virgil clearly signals his capacity for such play, in between the two passages on grafting, at the end of the delayed proem: *non ego cuncta meis amplecti versibus opto, / non, mihi si linguae centum sint oraque centum, / ferrea vox. ades et primi lege litoris oram; / in manibus terrae. non hic te carmine ficto / atque per ambages et longa exorsa tenebo* (2.42–46). As I noted (ad 2.45–6) «Why the disclaimer here in the programmatic invocation of *Georgics* 2 – in the invocation of a book which 25 lines later presents three unequivocally fictitious grafts (69–72), which presents praises of Italy which distort reality, and in places amount to no praises at all (136–76

and n.), and which ends (458–540) with a description of the joys of rustic life whose details are completely at variance with the agricultural realities of the poem? The very claim is itself a piece of ironical fiction, like *generatim* at 35 (see n.), with which it frames the invocation.» In the 309 pages and 1085 footnotes of C.'s book the reader will find only the following answer to my question, only the following treatment of these lines (n. 537): «Schon von daher fügen sich die Verse 42–6 schwer dem Zusammenhang. Sie werden wohl zu Recht von Zwierlein athetiert.» An optimistic assessment that rests on excising such passages is an assessment of a different poem than the one Virgil wrote.

The harshness of my criticisms is perhaps regrettable, but they seem necessary. Plautine scholars of the standing of Jocelyn and Gratwick pointed out in the pages of this journal and of Classical Review the naivety and arrogance of subjecting that ancient author's text to the sort of trimming that we have recently seen from Zwierlein. Before we see the 'method' applied to the remaining corpus of Latin poets, it is important that the response be a strong one; such reactions as the present one may at least have a prophylactic value for future young scholars of a field that will not survive long into the twenty-first century if it simply tries to outdo the worst excesses of the nineteenth.

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Michel P.J. van den Hout: *A commentary on the letters of M. Cornelius Fronto*. Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill 1999. XI, 725 S. (Mnemosyne. Suppl. 190.) 440 hfl.

Con la nuova fatica di van den Hout anche Frontone ha il suo monumentale commentario, come ogni autore antico che si rispetti. Un'opera di tal genere in questo caso arriva insieme troppo presto e troppo tardi. Dico troppo tardi perché, a distanza di quasi due secoli dalla prima scoperta maiana, non si è ancora stabilita una tradizione di commenti continui di qualche ampiezza sul Cirtense. Il commento più completo era finora quello di F. Portalupi, specie nella seconda edizione del 1997, benché la collana dei Classici Utet non permettesse molto di più. Assolutamente insufficienti, o per i tempi o per ragioni editoriali, quelli di A. Mai, di C.R. Haines (nella Loeb) e più recentemente quello spagnolo di A. Palacios Martín del 1992. Perciò il lavoro di v.d. H. è anche pionieristico.

Infatti un commentario vero e proprio giunge troppo presto per l'accelerazione che gli studi frontoniani hanno registrato in questi ultimi anni e quindi l'impossibilità di tener loro dietro, non solo, ma di individuare zone, in cui possa registrarsi un vasto consenso. Dopo la mia rassegna dell'Aufstieg (ANRW II, 34, 2, 1994, 873–918), che non compare nella bibliografia v.d. H., si è reso opportuno un aggiornamento (Bollettino di Studi Latini 27, 1997, 591–619), che, pur non essendo esaustivo, per un solo quinquennio registra ben 42 titoli, pochi dei quali risultano citati nel commentario in oggetto (la bibliografia del quale supera raramente il 1990). Non faccio fatica a immaginarne le ragioni: chi scrive grosse opere non può più leggere tutto e chi legge molto non può scrivere troppo. Inoltre è probabile che il manoscritto abbia fatto la sua anticamera prima di venire alla stampa: anche nella florida Olanda e con le magre prospettive degli studi classici in Europa un volume di questo genere costituisce una grossa impresa (e perciò tanto più meritoria) per qualsiasi editore. Purtroppo la scarna